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“Monstrous transformer”: Petrofiction and world literature

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This article presents a comparative study of two significant novels of oil-encounter modernization, George Mackay Brown’s *Greenvoe* (1972) and Abdelrahman Munif’s *Cities of Salt* (1984), in order to argue that such petrofiction both demands and enables consideration of the world-ecological regimes and environmental ramifications of maintaining dynamic oil frontiers. These hitherto unconnected novels are brought together via recent arguments for a refurbished notion of world literature, and thereby a new comparative method, and are read through critical debates and theories of petroculture emerging within the energy humanities. The comparative affinities of these texts make visible the ongoing forms of “energopower” determining both the past and future of oil-driven imperialism, but they also offer a means of aesthetic and environmental resistance to the carbonizing determinations of an unsustainable fuel-ecological world-system.

Keywords: *Greenvoe*; *Cities of Salt*; energy humanities; world literature; comparative literary studies; petrofiction; oil frontiers; oil-encounter novels

We are in a post-peak age of “enduring” fossil fuels. Demand and supply of conventionally and unconventionally extracted carbon continues to grow, despite proven and widely acknowledged warnings that at least two thirds of known carbon reserves must remain in the ground to control global warming (see *International Energy Agency Outlook* 2015). As Mike Berners-Lee and Duncan Clark (2013) have argued, state and corporate actors across the world act in bad faith by simultaneously acknowledging the carbon threat and continuing to enable its century-long upward curve, ensuring that, “for all the talk about finite resources and peak oil, scarcity is resoundingly not the problem” (86). In fact, relative abundance remains central to the neoliberal era, forcing environmentalists to re-evaluate the various sites, agencies and means sanctioning carbon’s continuing extraction, circulation and consumption.

It is this essential contradiction that underpins this article’s analysis of novelistic registrations of oil frontiers in relation to the so-called “world energy trilemma” of petromodernity (see World Energy Council 2016). Unprecedented local and global demand

for energy security, as well as issues of distribution, access and sustainability, are here placed in tension with a capitalist world-system heavily reliant on fossilized power. As Jason W. Moore (2015) explains, this system is a “world-ecology” whose historical growth and continuity depend on endless frontier expansion, technological revolution and the devaluation of key resources, along with cyclical reorganization of its ecological and energy regimes. The result is that, despite being non-renewable, there is a seemingly perpetual deferment (or masking) of oil’s finite status. Michael Watts (2001) suggests that petroleum’s “evacuative” qualities have produced a historically potent mixture of short-term practices, characterized by violence and displacement, rentier-borne corruption and state-capital collusion, albeit in varying forms across uneven oil-bearing territories and systemic peripheries. He identifies oil’s “peculiar sort of double movement” as a global commodity that has an “enclave character”, yet is more territorially expansive than any other “natural” resource (205). Indeed, as Watts explains, crude oil flows or is sucked away from extraction sites to be produced and refined elsewhere, exemplifying the predicament of locally lost value that is nonetheless “understood to have enormous value” across the world-system (205). Yet oil is not only exceptional in its multiform refinements or unprecedented power, but potentially “monstrous” in its socio-ecological and geopolitical ramifications. Such elements feature in both novels analysed below, but they also recur within various genres of petrolic literature, from across the accumulation/value chain, with the world-oil-system forming a locus for comparative correspondence. Here, the world-ecological monstrosity of oil operates dialectically by raising questions about how cultural work might also generate resistance to the characteristic outcomes of resource dispossession. As Timothy Mitchell (2011) demonstrates, oil’s peripheral locations, uneven distributions and restrictive labour patterns mean it has proved less salutary for collectivist forms of democracy than coal, its carbon-sister. Nevertheless, subplot depictions of strike/labour conditions and worker unrest circulate

throughout world petrofiction, from Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* (1926), through Rafael Jaramillo Arango's *Barrancabermeja* (1934), to Rilla Askew's *Fire in Beulah* (2001) and beyond.

“Worlding” petrofictions, the energy humanities and comparative study

The world reach of the carbon web requires and endorses a reformulated world-literary outlook that serves as a compass of interpretation for energetic resource fictions. For if oil's ubiquity lends it relationality on a world-scale, across *all* points of its production cycle, then its cultural extrapolations have somehow to manage that scope, scale and uneven connectivity. The Warwick Research Collective (WReC 2015) has usefully repositioned world literature as “the remaking of comparative literature” via “a fresh engagement with questions of comparative literary method” (7). But what, we must ask, is the appropriate method for interpreting the literature of the “hyper-object” that is the global oil assemblage?

A useful starting point is Lucia Boldrini's (2006) argument for thinking through and beyond comparative literature's traditional tension between object and method, and its restrictive orientations around language and translation. Boldrini proposes “the concept of nodal points, where different cultures come into contact, and from which different historical, artistic, cultural forces irradiate” (16-17). These nodes might be places, sites or geophysical phenomena, temporalities or axial routes and/or processes and infrastructures; a study of oil fiction offers “resources” as nodal points (including wind, water, geotherms, food systems, biomass, etc.), and oil frontiers as a prominent nodular and cultural network from which to begin. However, if the history of petroleum demonstrates its peculiarly unbounded locality after oil is struck, then how do oil's irrevocably transnational geo-economics inform, produce and react to its geo-culture? What, as Andrew Pendakis (Pendakis and Biemann 2012) asks, might constitute a “generalized aesthetics” of oil?

In what sense can we speak about an aesthetics of oil cultures, a set of recurring spatial, infrastructural, or architectural motifs, for example, or even a dominant structure of feeling or experience which seems to pass through the very molecules of a whole historical reality? Is there an aesthetics of oil or are its cultural manifestations too diverse and localized to be usefully generalized? (8)

These questions – pertinent and multiscalar – beg that we impute a comparativist logic to what I would insist is the necessary “worlding” of petrofiction and other resource texts. Juxtaposing two seemingly disparate and specific petrofictions, from Scotland and Saudi Arabia respectively, the comparative analysis below suggests that there *is* “an aesthetics of oil” and that this can be uncovered by comparing the recurring motifs, systemic connections and structures of feeling produced by oil modernity. Following WReC’s (2015) strapline that world-literature is “*the literature of the world-system*” (8; emphasis in original), this comparative reading helps us move beyond the useful but restrictive idea of nodality by linking energetic texts and literary forms whose unlikely likenesses correspond with the world-system’s carbon flows, exchanges, relations and circulations. Such analyses might involve examining comparable texts from immediately identifiable petro-sites, such as drilling platforms, pipelines or gas stations, but we can and must also incorporate the hitherto under-connected sites, actions, motives and events that form the wider petroculture: the myriad products and uses of consumer plasticity, for example, or of carbon-transport systems and everyday life in suburban infrastructures. Petroleum culture is enacted wherever there is detectable reliance (conscious or otherwise) on fossil energy and, while this presents an interpretive challenge beyond the limits of this article, it should not be beyond its scope. As Stephanie LeMenager (2014) reminds us, the consumptive “petrotopia” (74) of neoliberal modernity relies heavily on cheap, accessible quantities of petroleum from territories beyond

the nation-state (see also Huber 2013). Likewise, oil's transnational zone of transaction has always involved the occlusion of ever-expanding extractive spaces and conditions. Steve Lerner (2010) has named these environmentally-toxic areas of production the "sacrifice zones" (2) of modern capitalism, which spread across the world to create and sustain "The Great Acceleration" and corresponding population surge since 1945. As J.R. McNeill and Peter Engelke (2014) explain, from the Niger Delta to Alberta to Siberia to Ecuador, these are zones "where the cost of energy extraction included pervasive ecological degradation" (19), created to maintain oil's regular supply and thereby expand its demand.

Developmentally, oil has created countless progressive techno-social advances across its systemic cycle of accumulation. However, as Michael T. Walonen's (2012) authoritative study reveals, such advances are consistently accompanied by the destruction of "traditional spatial orders", as well as "vast levels of material inequality" (59). This progressive-destructive logic permeates the world-system through a particularly recursive and violent form of oil frontierism, which, as Watts describes, is both "permanent and dynamic" (2012, 446), always looking to expand and deepen, but also to prevent any possible shrinkage. Like a tidal system, the oil frontier can fade and return, re-establishing itself in different territories or economic moments, or resurfacing in new forms and striations within an established site of oil extraction or production. Indeed, its world-historical character means oil operates, as Watts states, as a "permanent frontier [that] marks the ongoing recursive construction of new spaces of accumulation" (446). As oil technology develops, prices fluctuate, new deposits are discovered and land, property, people and states become increasingly beholden to carbon-democratic forms of energy securitization. Oil thus becomes a fixed and paradoxically finite resource whose frontiers are permanently elastic and expansive; willing to move and grow while benefiting from ongoing petrocultural hegemony at a global level.

High-carbon systems developed over the “long” 20th century via what G.C. Unruh (2000) describes as a socio-technical “carbon lock-in” (817), which makes it difficult to see beyond an energy-intensive notion of capitalist modernity. Dominic Boyer and Imre Szeman (2014) insist that cultural work offers a means to the way out, and cite the very terms and conditions of this “lock-in” as dialectically enabling the energy humanities to emerge as a cross-disciplinary critical resource, offering interlinked modes, methods and perspectives from science, finance, sociology and engineering as well as literary-cultural studies. The field’s core rationale maintains that (particularly carbon-based) energy has been abstracted and relatively under-determined in cultural and aesthetic terms, despite being *produced, generated and circulated by* cultural production. The bolder assertion would be that energy appears, de facto, within *all* cultural texts, spanning epochs, territories and ecological regimes as well as their corresponding generic forms. The nature and extent of that appearance, whether explicitly registered, unconsciously abstracted or sedimented into a text’s form and content, is and will be crucial to the field’s interpretive and methodological moves as it consolidates in the years ahead. Thus far, however, energy-conscious critical work has been both compelled by and loosely constellated around the continuing *imperial* nature of energy’s competing hierarchical forms within a world encased in ecological precarity. Boyer (2014) sees this as requiring “an alternative genealogy of modern power”, premised on “energopower”, and involving greater “recognition that conditions of life today are increasingly and unstably intertwined with particular infrastructures, magnitudes, and habits of using electricity and fuel” (325). Such “recognition” is beginning to emerge. In *After Oil* (2016), the Petrocultures Research Group argues that art and literature offer a unique interpretative mode through which to illuminate energy’s apparent invisibility, since “we will not make an adequate or democratic transition to a world after oil without first changing how we *think, imagine, see, and hear*” energy in our culture (44-45; emphases in original).

Crucially, though, any reading of energy culture or literature must have a fully “worlded” horizon, because to “see” oil is to see it systemically, and to see it systemically requires a relational and consciously energetic world-ecological outlook.

Michael Niblett (2012) adapts and unites the WReC’s world-literary approach with Moore’s world-ecological framework to insist that “world literature is also the literature of the capitalist world-ecology” (19), and to argue that literary production from (semi-)peripheral zones and commodity frontiers demands nothing but a wholly refurbished world-literary perspective. In Niblett’s convincing account, new comparative readings spring forth between and across forcibly imposed ecological regimes, “making it possible to test the argument for likenesses in the aesthetic codification of ecological revolutions on a wider historical and geographical scale” (24). This assertion is crucial to the following comparative reading of two texts from a particularly prominent strand of petrofiction that I would argue, mobilizing Niblett and coming via Boyer, must be read as registering what we can term the “fuel-ecological world-system”. These texts not only provide novel means to comprehend the historical-imperial nature of the carbon web and its “fuel-ecological” world-character, but they also contain some traceable elements of low-carbon culture that might signal alternatives to the crisis-laden scenarios of petromodernity they principally relate.

“Oil-encounter” novels and the shock of transformational dispossession

In his seminal essay, Amitav Ghosh (1992) argued that “petrofiction” was strangely thin on the ground in world literature. This was astonishing for Ghosh, given oil’s heavy saturation in modern global life, and could only be attributed to the fraught political geography that made “the history of oil [...] a matter of embarrassment verging on the unspeakable, the pornographic” (29). This controversial history, coupled with oil’s peripheral locations and “bafflingly multilingual” territories, had created a “literary barrenness” that marks

petrocultural production and left it peculiarly lacking in petrofiction (30). Ghosh's essay, which is essentially an extended review of Abdelrahman Munif's ([1984] 1989) *Cities of Salt*, emerged prior to the feverish internationalization of "the novel" via the refurbished world-literary rubrics invoked above. However, despite his later repositioning (see Rubenstein 2014; Macdonald 2012), Ghosh's claim regarding oil's repressed, hidden and/or peripheral perspectives remains very much in play. A strong critical insistence on the general "invisibility" of oil increasingly stands alongside recognition of its spectacular violence and the huge material impositions that have accompanied its terraforming of territories and publics across the world. For the many extraction sites on the (semi-)periphery of the world-system – *and* within cultural production from those areas – oil is or has been overtly visible, even if it is subsequently made "unseen", either by privatization, securitization and military enforcement *or* by its mediated inaccessibility.

For the second half of this article, then, I want to examine in greater detail literary examples that shape the recursive transnational contours of oil's explicit and violent visibility. My focus is on two novels that relate the creation of a new oil space to the neoliberalizing high-carbon culture that has been dominant since the late 1960s. Both George Mackay Brown's *Greenvoe* from Scotland, published in 1972, and Munif's *Cities of Salt* from Saudi Arabia, 1984, convey emblematic, and eminently comparable, "oil shock" scenes that exemplify the typically aggressive destruction and transformation produced by the pursuit of petroleum across the world-system's oil-bearing regions. Such oil-encounter novels typically focus on initial discovery and extraction, but in some cases the refining, storage, transportation and circulation of petroleum and oil-based products come to the fore, and likewise the productivity regimes that develop with, in and around this new resource space. Oil initially operates in the background of banal human stories, but eventually reveals itself as a physically and culturally irresistible phenomenon, shocking in its transformational

power, and deeply invested in what, referencing David Harvey's (2006) "accumulation by dispossession", Rob Nixon (2011) describes as "displacement without moving":

a more radical notion of displacement, one that, instead of referring solely to the movement of people from their places of belonging, refers rather to the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable. (19)

Socio-ecological, physical and financial forms of dispossession are thus all in operation in these and other oil-extraction texts, including Linda Hogan's (1991) *Mean Spirit*, Ken Saro-Wiwa's (1986) *Forest of Flowers*, Helon Habila's (2010) *Oil On Water* and Charles Red Corn's (2005) *A Pipe For February*, while a recent boom in petro-documentaries also has petro-dispossession at its centre, with notable examples including Ursula Biemann's (2005) *Black Sea Files*, Josh Fox's (2010) *Gasland* and Risteard O'Domhnaill's (2010) *The Pipe*.

At the close of Mackay Brown's ([1972] 1977) *Greenvoe*, a series of apocalyptic events relate the rapid eclipse of the landscape and community of Hellya, a tiny fictional Scottish island in the Orkney archipelago in the North Sea. In fact, the novel showed startling prescience in anticipating the actual experiences of the small Orkney island of Flotta, whose inhabitants (mostly small-hold farmers and crofters, without mains electricity, running water or regular fuel supplies, and with minimal state services) saw a huge section of their 2000-acre island terminalized by the Occidental Oil Company in 1974. Published three years after the 1969 discovery of oil in the North Sea Continental Shelf, and two years prior to the first on-stream production, *Greenvoe* anticipates this transition in an unsettling and uncanny manner. Blending genres and styles, the narrative unfolds through peculiar admixtures of form and content, mixing conventional realism with irrealist threads, fragments of modernism

with ethno-pastoralist threnody and science-fictional elements with eco-apocalyptic mythology. Island life is pulverized to dust and relics over the course of ten pages following oil's late arrival in the novel: villages and farms are razed, the island's ecosystem spectacularly degraded and largely unsuspecting crofters and fishermen either dispersed or integrated into a temporary new labour force. Meanwhile, the palimpsestic arrangement of multiple multinational character studies presented in the preceding five chapters is punctuated by periodic interjections from the island's resident organic intellectual, who narrates the island's "informal" history of 800-year waves of migration, colonization and systemic incorporation. All these stories – large and small – are brutally swept away in a deliberately wrought tonal nonchalance, barely registering as an afterthought in the verticality of petro-industrialization. Responsible for this swooping transition is "Black Star", a sinister and anonymous organization that set up a drilling installation on the ancient cornfield at the core of the island and around its coastline. As in other "coming-of-oil" narratives, the project leaves the community thunderstruck, and the local narrator at a loss for words to describe the oil-fuelled tumult.

Bearing echoes of *The Tempest*, chapter six of *Greenvoe* begins thus:

The cone of Korsfea was shorn off. The loch of Warston was drained; red-throated divers and eiders and swans had to seek other waters. Hellya was probed and tunnelled to the roots. [...] The island began to be full of noises – a roar and a clangour from morning to night. A thin shift of dust hung between the island and the sun. The sea birds made wider and wider circuits about the cliffs. Rabbits dug new warrens at the very edge of the crags. (Mackay Brown [1972] 1977, 224)

The shock, power and speed of the determination of an oil age are here prosaically conveyed in stark, mythically tinged sentences, as we learn that “what’s coming to this island is beyond prose” (218), and an “alien” technocratic discourse – until now only surreptitiously in evidence in the form of a corporate report made by a mysterious energy-company “stranger” – supersedes the various “folk” voices of the previous chapters. *Greenvoe*’s plot, tone and rhetorical mode thus work together to maximize the acceleration of apparently definitive and transformative actions, wrenching events into a wholly different form of plot infrastructure. Like the island, the novel’s structure is wholly destabilized, “probed and tunnelled to the roots” (223). This is the terminalization caused by petroleum in a literary substructure – a figurative endworld. The passive voice develops a form of pathos towards the apparently hapless victims of this extrinsic power, and events ensue familiar to us from postcolonial narratives of encounter, but also from the “longer” story of village modernization and capitalist-industrial incorporation: social place cedes to resource space; foreign labourers outnumber locals; commodities multiply and prices inflate; and local laws and customs are questioned and traduced. As petro-infrastructures multiply, distance shrinks and travel increases, polluting sea, land and air alike; ancient agricultural land is tunnelled out, mountaintops removed and natural geology reshaped, securitized and privatized. The soil progressively erodes as the cyclical agricultural regime cedes to the new fuel-based evacuative process of world-petroculture.

In all of this there is great emphasis on the capacious, unprecedented and irresistible. The disjuncture of the final chapter reinforces the culture shock, but the shift in texture of narrated events also registers the chronotopic warping of petroleum aesthetics in this charged, anthropocentric shift. This is “The Great Acceleration” in prose. It presents a challenge to the reader of frontierist petrofiction, but also an ecocritical opportunity: to what degree is this aesthetic rendition excessively “unreal”, hyperbolic even, in its accelerated condensation of

the resource grabs that typify the age of speed and unprecedented power enabled by oil? Weeks of largely secretive development and months of planning and construction can be dramatically rendered in a sentence or two – a reminder of fiction’s own refining abilities, its peculiar capacity to warp time and space, but also of the remarkable speed and dynamism of highly mobile oil infrastructures. As Christopher Harvie (1995) explains, the offshore industry uses computerized “dynamic positioning” (71) systems to help vessels maintain course and fix on their location and destination. This unity of technological speed and geospatial tracking connects the spatio-temporal acceleration enabled by oil-expansion with the time-space compression that David Harvey (1990) famously theorized as being symptomatic of the early 1970s post-Fordist moment, marking the world-historical context of “oil-shock” as that which facilitated, if not fuelled, the systemic shift into the neoliberal regime of “flexible accumulation”. The financialized logic of compression/expansion that underwrites neoliberal accumulation not only pervades the short-termism of oil-extractive practices, moreover, but also underwrites the energy-desperation of spooked western economies whose prospective energy insecurity post-1973 only accelerated competitive energy speculation and debt-based expansion.

Mackay Brown and Munif both write in the backdraft of these restructurings, amidst the dramatic acceleration of petroleum extraction. Theirs was an era of incipient peak-oil geopolitics and environmental activism, but also of neoliberal shock tactics, deregulation, petro-fuelled finance-directives and world-economic “stagflation” (itself dire news for climate-conscious eco-activists), all of which is formally apparent in their respective novels. The abrupt, conflated speed with which oil arrives and swiftly departs at the close of *Greenvoe* marks the absurd, anxious contingency of petro-capitalism’s reliance on a finite evacuative substance, not to mention a highly volatile, indexed commodity circulating within a world-system of financialized competition. Yet the novel’s uneasy, agitated prose also

clearly reflects the now well-established fact that the 1970s UK government fast-tracked the installation of North Sea oil so as to accelerate extraction and maximize revenue, while granting various concessions to foreign oil companies.

Frontierist oil's narrative haste thus conveys the "fast violence" of extractivism in the service of imperious, unimpeded flow; resistance appears impossible, a condition compounded by oil's unimaginable force, magnitude and formal disarray. Of course the narrative (re-)fashioning of modernity has always sought to conflate micro-event with protracted history, to present a scaled-up vantage point against and through which the demolition of the "local" can be envisaged. Petromodern narratives similarly rearrange and enlarge geo-economic and geo-cultural horizons and, in so doing, flatten other outlooks. Take, for example, the following passage from *Greenvoe*:

After six-weeks of pile-driving and crane-swinging, the pier got a temporary wooden extension. After that larger boats could approach and tie-up. Great cargoes of cement were unloaded, lorries, more hut sections, cranes, bulldozers, transformers.

What exactly was happening up there between the glebe and Korsfea? It was impossible for any village to find out [...] the metal monsters attacked the store from three sides. [...] The houses of the village went down, one after the other, as they were bought up by the authorities. They collapsed before clashing jaws and blank battering foreheads. (Mackay Brown [1972] 1977, 225-226)

Wrought in restless syntax, forged in conjunctive grammar, built in progressively piled-up clauses, this "monstrous" transformation conveys the exceptional and radically uneven nature of petro-development in form as well as content. The narrative tacks between residual and emergent rhetorical modes: repeatedly, words like "digging", "drilling" and "rigs" become

the new linguistic dominant, demoting former agricultural semantics, while the voracious large independent mobile machines (or LIMMS) become petromodern origin symbols, offering humans (and narrators) unprecedented power and capacity with which to terraform landscape, population and environment. In an authoritative essay on oil in the Arabic novel, Ellen McLarney (2009) argues that uprooted peoples become “fuel for the machines”, representing “not only the transition to a society constituted by machines but also the demand for labor to sustain their functioning” (192). Depicting these labour-consuming engines as monstrous is a recognizably anti-modern form of ecopolitics, where the inorganic figuration of machines is made comprehensible through the darkly organic realm of the industrial unreal – as seen, most famously, in both Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854) and Zola’s *Germinal* (1885). But a larger question is also fashioned through the formal and thematic manipulation of anonymity, secrecy and deceit in *Greenvow*, as in other petrotexts, whose subjunctive structure deliberately withholds fuller details of state/corporate “plotting” and planned petro-development, just as both state and oil company withhold the rights to demolition in the name of powering-up: namely, what is this all for and who does it? These are the questions of narratorial inquisition and subtextual interrogation, recurrent throughout world petrofiction, that Saby Hafez (2006) argues functions as a paranoid subtext in Munif’s oeuvre, a “kind of epistemological maze” (47). Such an interrogative quality imbues the reading of such texts with a retrospective lesson in the historical location and determination of resource-extractivism. But might such work provide any means to give pause to proposed *future* developments, such as fracking or other unconventional modes of fossil extraction?

This carbon-democratic question cannot but rise to the surface, especially given contemporary petroculture’s intention to recast questions about the very meaning and necessity of “energy security” in lieu of the planetary warming and climatological instability endemic to what Moore (2015) terms the “Capitalocene” (169). It refuses to go away just

because carbon capital seeks continual returns. One gnomic statement from a company representative in *Greenvoe* bears out the seemingly indispensable policy of rapid extraction: “this *Black Star* is utterly essential to the future of the Western World” (Mackay Brown [1972] 1977, 254). That such a statement retains its import is testament to the military-industrial complex’s fossil fuel and nuclear essentialism, but also to the renewable relevance of such fiction in contemporary world-ecological debates. For this statement harbours a revisionist, potentially resistant, reading that pushes against the grain of petro-capitalism’s infrastructure without losing sight of the power of instrumentalism. If geo-engineering of such force, magnitude and spectacle can be carried out in the name of “essential future security”, then might the seemingly “aggressive measures” (Klein 2014, 50) required to decrease global emissions not be envisaged as similarly necessary, sustainable and therefore eminently possible? The fiction of oil frontierism plays out that de-carbonizing potential. It allows us to imagine a reinscription of energetic history by reorienting the force of will power, rerouting “energopower”, and thereby reinventing carbon modernity’s signature strategy of planned obsolescence.

Greenvoe’s rendition of the deleterious results of petro-capital’s proprietorial appropriation of land, dwelling space and subsurface in pursuit of undrilled territories finds a literal and metaphorical equivalent in *Cities of Salt*. Published ten years after Mackay Brown’s text, Munif’s novel emerged at the other end of the epochal oil-shock decade that spans the two works. This period has been viewed as the most crucial “energy” decade of the late 20th century, both kick-starting conditions for neoliberalization and overseeing a world-systemic counter-revolution to the “high-carbon” centres of energy monopolization. Despite its historical setting between the 1930s and 1950s, Munif’s novel needs to be understood as reacting in part to the events of the decade preceding its 1984 publication, during which OPEC and Saudi Arabia in particular exerted putative postcolonial power as crucial “petro-

states”. Their attempt to wrest oil-spigot control from existing world-energy hegemony was successful to a degree, but eventually became compromised by a deadly mix of neoliberal petro-capitalism and US energy imperialism alongside postcolonial regional warfare and internecine cultural struggles between conservative and modernizing forces, and ethnic pre-eminence versus political centralization.

This systemic turbulence is subsumed into the narrative of *Cities of Salt*, a key historical petro-text for reading modernity’s expanding and recursive oil frontier. The anxiety that pervades the text’s every level is partly related to the failure of Arabic resistance to core “energopowerful” interests, driven principally by US energy concerns from the mid-1930s through to the late 1970s, and fuelled by capitalism’s continuing reliance on maintaining supply. Indeed, it is this 40-year struggle over Mesopotamian and Arabian resource landscapes that links texts like *Greenvow* to *Cities*. The US state’s use of private oil companies as the arm of capitalist consolidation and energy access throughout the Middle East ensured the displacement of British power in that region. Such geopolitical competition, along with oil’s growing global financial status, in turn spurred the discovery and infrastructural development of oil and gas deposits in the treacherous North Sea waters during the late 1960s. The period covered in these two novels is thus characterized by unprecedented demand for oil, in line with unparalleled consumption, *and* the geological consensus that “easy oil” is running out. Meanwhile, the “windfall” attraction of a domestic oil supply that marked the end of coal’s collectivist strain of carbon democracy seamlessly enabled the empowerment of another: the anti-collectivist Thatcherite neoliberalization and Reaganomic programmes that began in earnest in the 1980s. In conjoining these distinct but interlinked “energopolitical” frontiers, and thereby connecting “formal” imperialism with neoliberal hegemony, both novels demonstrate concern over the long-term loss of cultural

specificity and control of “local” resources at the behest of (neo-)imperial capital and a global political economy hooked on barrel-price revenue.

In Munif’s depiction of the nascent Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, another oil-struck and dumbfounded narrator relays how the ground literally and metaphorically shifts beneath the land upon which nomadic communities have depended for generations. Here, as in *Greenvoe*, the narrator resorts to the mythico-spiritual unreal as a means of local cognizance of frontierist destruction: the desert “began to do incredible, unfathomable things [...] there was a prolonged tremor within the earth, like a convulsion, and the insides of the earth began to spill out” (Munif [1984] 1989, 65). As with *Greenvoe*, the opening sections utilize ominous undertones to herald the rapid destruction of the landscape surrounding the trading-post oasis of Wadi al-Uyoun by the shady exploration and construction team brought in by the US oil company (or, later, Saudi Aramco). A speculative form of metanarrative is also in play, forcing interrogation of what the future will hold in lieu of this phenomenal event. In both novels, semi-ironic “communal” narrators shuttle between a relatively objective view of events and the incredulous voice of the bewildered local populace. This local focalization generates the environmental justice element in both texts, particularly the naïve sense of disempowerment resulting from petro-development’s false promises of bountiful exchange.

The aggressive co-production of “Saudi” “nature” by which oil replaces water as the most significant liquid resource is presented in a manner recognizable across oil-frontier petrofiction. Nixon suggests that “Munif is, at heart, a chronicler of violent temporal compression”, with the *Salt* quintet revealing “a post-petroleum frontier that beggars the imagination” (2011, 101). Yet the quintet’s imagining of oil has formal correlatives in other petrofiction. In *Cities*, as in *Greenvoe*, the characterization and narrative arrangements register uneven and accelerated development, with time-space compression, psychological experience and developmental policy signalling oil’s short-termist character. Again,

anonymous capital and its “mysterious foreign guests” (Munif [1984] 1989, 25) arrive “without warning” (67) and the rights, property and resource claims of local inhabitants are either traversed by the promise of fruits-to-come, or violently seized. Land and resources are quickly segregated, securitized and privatized following rapid urbanization, rendered inaccessible to displaced non-elite locals. Meanwhile, local populations operating outside capitalist production are rapidly incorporated into oil-related labour for temporary construction, pipeline or transport work; in one emblematic scene, Bedouins give up their camels, swapping them for refinery overalls and wage-labour. A “foreign” reserve labour-force is imported, transforming local cultures and small-scale economies, and assaulting residual forms of belief and sensibility: “No one had ever dreamed such people existed” (67), we are told, of the diverse influx of migrant workers seeking oil-based opportunities. In both novels, then, the local “world” is made bigger *for* and *by* oil, though the direction and experience of “globalization” is uneven and one-way: harbours are deepened and roads built, but the refinery city is divided into American/Arab enclaves with unequal access to goods and services. The entire region becomes skewed to the export of oil, its fiscal revenues, oil-labour mobility and a political regime corresponding to oil interests. Once again, emphasis is placed on swift and clandestine “background” shifts in carbon-political, technological and infomatic power. A secret but pervasive surveillance regime is installed, capacious bureaucracy emplaced and a disciplinary managerialist regime emerges, destabilizing unions and binding state elites and the police force to oil-refinery management. As with Upton Sinclair’s *Oil!*, wherein all potentially radical or subversive oil workers are recorded and blacklisted, everything militates against any form of resistance to the smooth outward flow of carbon and oil capital.

For the former inhabitants of Wadi al-Uyoun, “nothing seemed real anymore” (Munif [1984] 1989, 109). Existence becomes dreamlike, hallucinatory, as the swift rearrangements

of upscaled carbon-fuelled transformation arrive. “Within days”, we learn, “everything in the wadi changed – men, animals and nature” (71):

It happened as quickly as in a dream. [...] As soon as the camp was erected, the men paced off the area, put up wire fencing and short white pickets [...]. Then they opened up their crates and unloaded large pieces of black iron, and before long, a sound like rolling thunder surged out of this machine, frightening men, animals and birds. [It was] as fast as a magic trick. (68)

Akin to *Greenvoe*, the new oil-powered machines roaming the remote “wilderness” (in fact an agriculturally productive “natural resource”, offering inhabitants nurture as well as sustenance) are figured as relentless monsters, roaring “night and day” (72). Their ability to illuminate life around the clock signifies the new “powered-up” oil-electric world, altering work-patterns and diurnal rhythms to serve capitalist organization and facilitate seemingly limitless accumulation. Again, cognitive and cultural adjustment is required to cope with such massive environmental and socio-ecological reorientation that, among “dozens of other matters”, could “not be recounted in words” (70). The discursive response is, tellingly, yet another *Tempest*-uous imposition on the senses:

A mad roaring suddenly filled the wadi. It was like distant thunder or the sound of huge numbers of filled waterskins falling on swampland: it shook the air and pained the ears so much that it was hard to tell where it was coming from [...] it seemed that the group of men in search of oil, after completing the requirements of their first phase, had decided to begin. [...] So gigantic and strange were these iron machines that no one had ever imagined such things even existed [...].

No one could describe the moment. [...] No one could describe or imagine it. [...]

The world had ended. (96-98)

The petro-world appears as if by magic and as magic itself: estranged and unprecedented, if “indescribably” real. Monstrous technologies and diabolical machines herald and orient this extraordinary new world; a time and space powered by petroleum’s scale, scope and force as the machines are by oil’s intensified capacities. These machines are presented as the new cosmogony, as yet incomprehensible to those on whom multinational petroculture enacts its will, whose machinations are described in the pre-modern signifiers of thunder, waterskins and astronomical navigation that petromodern life will progressively diminish but, crucially, not fully eclipse. Engineering ever-more production, LIMMS *are* the new oil-system: ending the daylight cycle and its laborious constraints, escalating the flexible, endless production of machine-capitalism and advancing petroleum’s downstream circulation schedules. With their unprecedented power, they accelerate and capaciously expand petrocapitalism’s scale and effect. As the oil-soaked peripheries are urbanized and hooked up to the central lines of petromodernity, the sudden end of the wadi (itself a *world* of trade and transregional culture flows) is cast in terms of awe, haste and stealth, and is lamented. This form of ending is symbolized in these and other oil-frontier novels as Edenic fall, bringing either tempest or drought: orchard trees are demolished, the ancient cornfield tunnelled out and natural watering holes bored dry. Deep roots are likewise excavated as religious, ethnic and ecological ties are simultaneously venerated and eclipsed, relegated into artefact by the new petro-world.

Both novels display a lack of centripetal focus on “heroic” protagonist development. Rather, the pattern is communal, episodic and diffuse in both structure and relation, with multiple characters and events. We are challenged to suture together apparently distinct

storylines according to the altered ontological and material world of petrolic speed, social transition and technological capacity. In most oil-encounter fictions, though, the pre-oil world doesn't quite disappear but persists in archaic fits and spurts alongside and within oil-driven modernity. The co-evality typically associated with combined and uneven development emerges, enabling reconsideration of "post-oil" sensibility in "pre-oil" shapes and forms. Both novels express nostalgia for a time prior to oil. But this should neither be fully dismissed as a conservative yearning for a simpler life, nor written off as ecological idealism; the pre-oil worlds are *not* represented as utopian communities living in prelapsarian nature. In *Greenvoe*, oil leaves dramatically and suddenly as the future generation's reclamation of the dead, exhausted island becomes, in climate-anxious readings, a claim for the possibility of post-oil sustainability and energo-ecological rights. But this is only ever rudimentary. The same element occurs throughout *Cities of Salt*, whose very title projects urban unsustainability, but is there aided by a narrative chronology that shifts between analepsis, anxious questioning about what is coming next, and gloomy retrospection for a world already passed.

What we have then are two hitherto unconnected novels of oil's frontierism, written at and about different times, in vastly different geographies, ethnicities and cultural histories, by singular novelists unaware of one another's work. Yet the unifying resource system of petro-capitalism forges fundamental cultural affinities and world-ecological connections that cut across and ultimately transcend such disparities. I have argued that oil has recognizable form, and that its mobile, repetitive and relational logics are detectable in petrofictions and other significant representations of petro-development, compelling their comparative reading under the sign of world-literature. It is clear that there *is* a world-extraction-system, with a "travelling" set of thematic *and* aesthetic attributes, and that world-literary examples of oil's explosive violence occur most prolifically on the periphery of that system. But this is only

half of the story. The next task is to connect and compare resource texts from all points, or links, in oil's value chain, from (semi-)periphery to core, (refined) pipeline liquid to global stock liquidity. Mitchell has argued that, to truly grasp the political valences of oil capitalism at discrete and multiple levels, it is necessary to remain fluid and unrestricted in seeking world-systemic connections (2011). One logical step from a cultural perspective, then, is to compare texts of resource imperialism with those that register oil's "offshoring" into financial systems, where it is circulated, leveraged and mediated in various "fictitious" ways, with bloody and material world-ecological consequences. The aim would be to reveal the spectacular energopower in the "fiction" of the consumer worlds fuelled by late capitalism's petroculture: a world-system of sprawling suburbs and soccer sponsorships; of shopping routines and waste systems; of "just-in-time delivery" from Dubai to New York City to Moscow. "Cities of Salt" indeed.

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